In November 2019, roughly 30 participants took part in a poverty simulation at the Cupertino Senior Center in Silicon Valley (Gelhaus, 2019). Designed by the Missouri Community Action Network, the poverty simulation was designed to help participants better identify with the plight of underserved Americans in poverty. Participants are immersed within an environment in which they work with community resources for four 15-minute sessions, which each represent a whole week in the life of an individual living in poverty (Vandsburger, et al., 2010). Cupertino CAPS facilitator Elizabeth Lilly of Catholic Charities submits that the simulation serves as a method of raising awareness about poverty (Liu, 2019). A 2010 study of the effects of the poverty simulation showed that there was a statistically significant change in the student participants’ ability to understand and identify with the experiences of people living in poverty after the simulation (Vandsburger, et al., 2010). The ability to empathize with others’ radically different experiences and conditions is crucial for transformative learning—learning that allows for a paradigm shift in one’s thinking. California managerial consultant Anna Khachikyan explains that a “deeper understanding of barriers to healthcare access” would be especially helpful for health professionals and specialists who participate in the CAPS program (Khachikyan, 2018). Echoing this sentiment, Texas medical student Kyra Frost applauded the program for simulating “what it feels like to be stuck or caged by one’s own life circumstances and socioeconomic factors” (Garris, 2018).

Although the poverty simulation has garnered support from some community leaders and healthcare providers, it has also been met with criticism. Dr. Susan Roll, the Director of the School of Social Work at CSU Chico, argues that the CAPS program has effectively gamified poverty—for better or for worse (Lee V. Gaines/Illinois Newsroom, 2018). Some media outlets have been quick to criticize it as hypocritical and a tool of virtue signaling (Stiles, 2019; Berry, 2019). Drawing on her personal experience with homelessness, Cupertino resident and poverty simulation participant Sherel Hayes argues that “one day doesn’t do it” (Liu, 2019). According to Hayes, a better alternative to trying to empathize with poor Americans in the simulation is actually “going to a nonprofit and helping” (Liu, 2019). Opting for the latter would directly address the lack of material resources contributing to the issue.
Furthermore, as a result of the 2010 study on the poverty simulation, Vandsburger, et. al., reported that “students’ critical thinking about poverty, namely, their understanding of the individual and the social factors contributing to poverty, did not change after participating in the poverty simulation.” For this reason, the poverty simulation may not be able to impact participants in many ways that researchers hope it can. On top of that issue, the manager of the poverty simulation program for the Missouri Community Action Network, Mary Bifulco, admits that “there’s not a lot of quality control” for their simulation kit (Lee V. Gaines/Illinois Newsroom, 2018). This oversight could lead to a reinforcement of certain social stereotypes that we unconsciously have about impoverished Americans. If simulation facilitators fail to ensure quality control through productive discussions about the causes of poverty and the community solutions for it, it is far too easy for participants to critically engage with the simulation in counter-productive and harmful ways without meaning to do so.

As the poverty simulation is employed by researchers in different communities, we might come to discover more about what this experimental approach can achieve in its participants. In February 2020, students at the University of Texas at Austin College of Pharmacy will take part in the Missouri Community Action Network’s poverty simulation. Austin, in particular, is a city with a growing homeless population that is in critical need of immediate action. Could the poverty simulation offer a way for Austin citizens to cultivate empathy with the plight of the underserved? Or, is it merely a social gamification of the stresses of poverty?

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical values are in conflict with the poverty simulation? Are there any contexts in which it can be simulated ethically?
2. Under experimental conditions, can simulations of poverty effectively generate genuine experiences of empathy? How might these experiences differ from experiences of empathy toward the impoverished that one might have in real life?
3. If the poverty simulation was conducted through virtual reality headsets, would it have the same status as ethically permissible or not? Explain your reasoning.

Further Information:


“The Poverty Simulation.” *University of Texas at Austin College of Pharmacy*, 2020. Available at: http://sites.utexas.edu/povertysimulation/


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https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/ethicsproject/